This week's question to consider:
I have been learning so much that I now question everything. Are idioms automatically problematic now? How about "you guys" as a general way of addressing a crowd? Is that also problematic? I say it all the time, is that an othering?

Pro tip: Yay! Welcome to the world of critically rethinking long held beliefs, practices, and language structures. We are delighted that you have joined us here. Also, the answer to this question is… maybe.

For a long time, in English we had the following pronouns:

The highlighted box of second person singular is one that has gone out of style, for a few reasons.

	First Person	**Second person**	**Third person**
	Talking about yourself	*Talking to someone else about them*	*Referring to a third person when talking to someone*
Singular	I, me, mine, my	thee, thou, thine	he, her, they, it, one
Plural	we, us, ours	you, ye, your	they

Etymologists suggest that the reason is mostly to do with the distinction between the singular and plural second person pronouns; it was a sign of respect to address royalty or people with status more formally with the plural "you" rather than the singular.

So, for instance, saying "how art thou?" would be super familiar, whereas "how are you?" was a more formal and inherently respectful speech pattern.

Over time, this came to say more about the second person singular options rather than the second person plural, so it was dropped out of common usage. But then we found ourselves with the situation of not knowing whether we were addressing a singular person or a group of people. There was then a shift in general speech patterns that called for changing the plural second person from you, to illustrate whether it was singular or plural.

This is where Guy Fawkes comes in.

In Britain, in 1605, there was an assassination attempt against the sitting king. The plan was to set off gunpowder in the House of Lords. This attempt arose due to political unrest, as are all assassination attempts, really, but this one in particular was mounted to fight persecution and wrestle control back into the hands of those mounting this assassination attempt. Looking at that sentence again, I could be describing all assassination attempts, but I digress. Ultimately, this attempt failed, was highly publicised, and is known as the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. There were many people involved, one of whom was Guy Fawkes. Fawkes was the Guy in charge (see what I did there?) of the gunpowder cache. Someone leaked this information, and Fawkes was discovered guarding the explosives. As you can imaging, things did not end well for Guy Fawkes. He was sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered (humans devise the worst punishments for humans), though he escaped that fate by

accidentally dying before he could be executed. Fawkes tripped, fell, and broke his neck the night before. Not suspicious at all.

I have omitted a lot of details, but essentially, following the failed assassination attempt that was the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, over time its failure came to be celebrated as "Guy Fawkes Night", among other names, and mostly in Britain. This celebration consisted of the classics: fireworks, bonfires, and effigy burning.

> ## ef·fi·gy
> /ˈefijē/   *noun*
>
> 1 a sculpture or model of a person
> 2 a roughly made model of a particular person, made in order to be damaged or destroyed as a protest or expression of anger

Since Guy Fawkes had been a symbol of the failed assassination plot, an effigy of this Guy became part of the celebration, with people, many of them children, created these Guy effigies out of whatever was on hand (old clothes, newspapers, that sort of thing), goal being the burning of this now maligned symbol of a human who had existed. This yearly celebration and custom went on for a number of years, and as a result, these "Guys" came to become synonymous with being oddly dressed. Not an awesome description, but I've heard worse, to be honest.

We humans tend to look back on the past and romanticise it, and this is no exception; with distance and time, Guy Fawkes was portrayed in a better light. In books and stories, Guy Fawkes became a sympathetic character, an acceptable protagonist in books and in stories, repainted as a revolutionary by historians, and even hailed as a "a major icon in modern political culture" in 2008 by historian Lewis Call. That's quite a shift.

"Guys" started out as referring to effigies of a specific despised public figure, who then became a less hated public figure, whose legacy has lasted centuries beyond his lifetime.

And now we have "you guys". Maybe it originally was meant to be a less respectful form of the second person singular? I don't know, but I do wonder. A lot can happen in 420 years, after all.

All this information, and I still I can't tell you if "you guys" is a problematic expression. Four hundred years ago, it was definitely a problematic expression. More recently, it denoted a positive comparison. Since it's someone's actual name, it doesn't seem especially sexist to me, though I could be wrong. It seems sort of neutral to me, but if you have an argument for not using "you guys" as the second person plural, I mean… I am all ears, you guys.

Recommended Reading:
Time.com Article (Sept 2019)| The Surprising Origins of the Phrase 'You Guys'
The Business Standard News Article (Oct 2019)| The surprising origins of the phrase 'You Guys'
APA Style (Oct 2019) | Welcome, Singular "They"
Royal Museums Greenwich | What is the story behind Bonfire Night?

Until next time,

Your friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity Coach
Therese Trofimencoff *(she/they)*